DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 890 TM 870 221

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TITLE Survey of Testing Practices.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Educational Research Association (Marina Del Ray, CA, November 13, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Achievement Tests; Content Validity; Educational Practices; *Educational Testing; Higher Education; Questionnaires; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Made Tests; Test Format; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Survey of Testing Practices

ABSTRACT

The Survey of Testing Practices was administered to 470 undergraduate students at Pepperdine University and the Univesity of California Los Angeles. The items concerned testing practices in three or four classes taken the previous term: type of test, test administration, class size, procedures for returning tests, test difficulty, and observed cheating. Responses indicated that 69 percent of the courses were freshman level and 20 percent were sophomore courses. An average of three to four tests were administered per term. Types of tests were: objective, 36 percent; essay, 30 percent; objective and essay mixed, 23 percent; and oral, 1 percent. The tests were described as difficult or very difficult in 59 percent of the responses. Ninety-two percent of the courses had final examinations, and 76 percent of these were comprehensive. Students almost always knew, in advance, when a test would be given and what it would cover. Most students felt the tests covered the course material adequately and that the instructions, testing environment, and time allowed were satisfactory. Little cheating was reported. About half of the instructors reviewed the returned tests, and about half of the students kept their answer sheets or copies of the items. The 27-item questionnaire is appended. (GDC)

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by

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California Educational Research Association Annual Meeting

Marina Del Rey, California

November 13, 1986

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TM 870 221

# Survey of Undergraduate Testing Practices

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Classroom tests can assist in making a number of decisions about students, instructional methods, and teachers. Considering that major decisions concerning students' lives are made in part from test scores, great care should be exercised in the testing process. Based on their experiences with numerous tests throughout the years, much skepticism has developed among students concerning classroom testing practices. Consequently, it is reasonable to question the nature of testing practices in schools and colleges and whether students' complaints are justified or merely "sourgrapes."

Surveys by college and university administrators have revealed that substantial percentages of the student complaints received are concerned with testing and grading (Milton & Edgerly, 1977). In a study of 55 faculty members at Indiana University (Chase & Wakefield, 1984), it was found that a majority of the instructors felt that they utilized a means of testing appropriate for the particular course taught. In another study concerned with the frequency of testing, it was found that college students seemed to benefit more if given the opportunity to improve their learning through frequent tests (McDavis, 1984). Results on classroom tests can provide instructors with feedback on what students have and have not learned. Once graded and returned, test results provide students with information regarding their strengths and weaknesses. Just as tests can be used as a means of feedback, they can also provide a way of identifying

items that are judged to be particularly important. Students frequently ask "Will it be on the test?", a familiar question to teachers. The question is rather discouraging at times when it appears to reflect an excessive concern with grades and less of an interest in what has actually been learned (Linn, 1983).

In an attempt to help instructors use testing more effectively, Foster (1982) listed various do's and don't's in regard to test preparation, administration and scoring. Among the numerous suggestions were providing information about the test in advance, establishing an adequate testing environment, returning exams as soon as possible, and reviewing the exams upon return.

Varying opinions as to testing practices exist on the part of faculty and students. Almost any test can be useful for some functions and in some situations, but even the best test can have damaging consequences if used inappropriately (Linden & Linden, 1968).

Because relatively few investigations have surveyed college testing practices in depth, it was considered potentially useful to administer a detailed questionnaire concerned with the kinds of tests administered, testing procedures, and students' attitudes toward the tests given in various classes. Such information should be helpful not only in revealing the frequency of certain testing practices but also in confirming or disconfirming various concerns pertaining to the inappropriate use of tests in university classrooms.

## Method

### Subjects

The questionnaire in Table 1 (see handout) was administered to three hundred and fifteen undergraduate students at the University of California-Los Angeles and 155 undergraduate students at Pepperdine University. The students were enrolled in introductory psychology and social science courses at UCLA and Pepperdine, respectively, during the winter of 1986.

### Materials and Procedures

As shown in Table 1, a 27-item questionnaire concerned with various matters pertaining to classroom testing was prepared. Students in each class were administered the questionnaire during class time. They were instructed not to put their names on the questionnaire and that their answers would be kept confidential.

The first item on the questionnaire asks students to list three or four courses which they have taken the previous term. The remaining 26 items are answered with reference to those courses. The survey questions deal with such issues as the type of tests given, how they were administered, the size of the class, procedures for returning tests, difficulty of the tests, and the amount of cheating observed during the testing period.

## Results

The frequency distributions of responses to all items on the questionnaire are given in Table 2. A majority of the students surveyed had taken courses in the natural science and mathematics categories followed by communications and humanities/fine arts. With respect to classification, most students were freshman.

In terms of tests, students indicated that an average of three to four tests (Mean = 3.26) were administered per term. A majority of the tests were objective or essay; very few oral tests were administered. The tests were generally described as being difficult. Final examinations were reported as being administered in nearly every course, being comprehensive in 75% of the cases.

Classes were, in almost all cases, informed in advance when a test was to be given, what the format of the test would be, and what material would be covered; very few "pop quizzes" were given. Most students indicated that tests covered the course material adequately and that the testing instructions were satisfactory. Little cheating was reportedly observed during the test period.

Students indicated that tests tended to be corrected and returned promptly and graded fairly. In only about half the cases did instructors review the returned tests. Furthermore, in only about half the cases were students permitted to keep their answer sheets or copies of the test questions.

## Discussion

Surveys such as this serve to illustrate testing practices currently in use at the college level and to shed light on the concerns pertaining to the inappropriate use of tests in university classrooms. In keeping with the fact that the sample consisted primarily of freshmen, most of the students surveyed had previously been enrolled in large, general-education courses with class sizes of over 100. As indicated by Williams et al. (1985),

the class size does not seem to affect the academic achievement of the students greatly. Consequently, the large class sizes reported in this survey are not necessarily a cause for alarm.

This survey found that tests are administered approximately three times per term in each course, a figure which, if it does not include the final examination, seems about right. Other good signs are that final examinations of a comprehensive nature are administered in the great majority of courses, testing is not limited to the objective format, and adequate instructions are given.

It appears that both faculty and students are in agreement in terms of the adequacy of the tests used and the material covered (Chase & Wakefield, 1984). Instructors appear to be correcting tests and returning them fairly promptly. Nevertheless, the frequency with which instructors review returned tests and permit students to keep either their answers or test questions is less than optimal. Considering the fact that final examinations are administered so frequently, the failure to review within-term tests or at least permit students to keep their corrected papers for later review would appear to be poor instructional policy.

## References


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Table 1

## Survey of Testing Practices

Directions: Think about the tests that you had in the three or four courses that you took last term. Label the courses Course A, Course B, Course C, and Course D. Then read each question listed below and write the correct answer pertaining to each course on the line provided under the question.

1. What was the name of the course?
   Course A:_____ Course B:_____

   Course C:_____ Course D:_____

2. What was the level of the course? (a) freshman; (b) sophomore; (c) junior; (d) senior.
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

3. Approximately how many students were in the course? (a) 1-10; (b) 11-20; (c) 21-35; (d) 36-50; (e) 51-100; (f) over 100.
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

4. How many tests were administered in the course during the term?
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

5. Was a final examination given in the course--yes or no?
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

6. If there was a final exam in the course, was it comprehensive (covered material for the entire course)--yes or no?
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

7. What type of test was usually administered in the course: (a) objective (multiple-choice, true-false, etc.); (b) essay (written); (c) mixture of objective and essay; (d) oral; (e) other?
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

8. Did the instructor usually inform the class far enough in advance when there was to be a test--yes or no?
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

9. Did the instructor announce in advance what type of test would be given--yes or no?
   Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

10. Did the instructor indicate in advance what material the test would cover--yes or no?
    Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

11. Were any "pop" quizzes or tests given in the course--yes or no?
    Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

12. In general, how difficult were the tests: (a) Very difficult; (b) Difficult; (c) Neither difficult nor easy; (d) Fairly easy; (e) Very easy?
    Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

13. Did the tests contain "extra credit" items, which students were not required to answer but could answer for bonus points --yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

14. Were students given some choice of which items to answer, say any five items out of 8, 10 items out of 13, etc.--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

15. Did the tests cover the course material adequately--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

16. Were the instructions on how to answer the test questions adequate--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

17. Was the testing "environment" quiet, free from distractions, and physically comfortable--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

18. Did the instructor remain in the room during the tests--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

19. In general, did you have enough time to do as well as you could on the tests--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

20. How much cheating did you observe during the tests: (a) very much; (b) much; (c) little; (d) very little; (e) none?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

21. Were the tests corrected (scored or graded) and returned to the students promptly--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

22. In your opinion, were the tests scored (graded) fairly--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

23. In the case of essay questions, were students' spelling and grammatical errors corrected before the tests were returned--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

24. In the case of essay questions, were the answers graded for spelling and grammar as well as content--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

25. Did the instructor review the tests when they were returned--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

26. Were students permitted to keep their scored (corrected) answer sheets or papers after they had been returned--yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

27. Were students permitted to keep copies of the test questions (items) --yes or no?
Course A:____ Course B:____ Course C:____ Course D:____

Table 2

Percentage of Courses Falling in Each Item Category

| | Percent |
|---|---|
| 1. Course Classification (N = 1540) | |
| Natural Science and Mathematics | 28.8 |
| Social Science and Education | 14.4 |
| Humanities and Fine Arts | 22.7 |
| Communications | 22.8 |
| Business and Economics | 6.9 |
| Religion | 4.5 |
| 2. Course Level (N = 1315) | |
| Freshman | 69.3 |
| Sophomore | 20.2 |
| Junior | 8.1 |
| Senior | 2.4 |
| 3. Number of Students in Course (N = 1539) | |
| 1-10 | 2.7 |
| 11-20 | 18.1 |
| 21-35 | 19.0 |
| 36-50 | 2.9 |
| 51-100 | 5.5 |
| Over 100 | 51.6 |
| 4. Number of Tests Administered (N = 1442) | |
| 1 | 7.8 |
| 2 | 30.4 |
| 3 | 26.4 |
| 4 | 17.0 |
| 5 | 10.1 |
| 6 | 4.1 |
| 7 | .8 |
| 8 | .8 |
| 9 | 2.7 |
| Mean = 3.26 Median = 3.05 | |
| 5. Final Exam Given? (N = 1532) | |
| Yes | 92.0 |
| No | 8.0 |

Table 2 (cont'd)

| | Percent |
|---|---|
| 6. Was Final Exam Comprehensive? (N = 1456) | |
| Yes | 75.5 |
| No | 24.5 |
| 7. Type of Test Administered (N = 1449) | |
| Objective | 36.3 |
| Essay | 30.4 |
| Objective and Essay Mixed | 22.5 |
| Oral | 1.0 |
| Other | 9.8 |
| 8. Class Informed Test to Be Given? (N = 1476) | |
| Yes | 96.8 |
| No | 3.2 |
| 9. Type of Test Announced in Advance? (N = 1479) | |
| Yes | 96.8 |
| No | 3.2 |
| 10. Material Covered by Test Announced in Advance? (N = 1476) | |
| Yes | 94.4 |
| No | 5.5 |
| 11. Pop Quizzes Given? (N = 1514) | |
| Yes | 9.6 |
| No | 90.4 |
| 12. Difficulty of Tests (N = 1472) | |
| Very difficult | 19.8 |
| Difficult | 39.3 |
| Neither difficult nor easy | 28.5 |
| Fairly easy | 9.1 |
| Very easy | 3.3 |
| 13. Extra Credit Items on Test? (N = 1478) | |
| Yes | 13.5 |
| No | 86.5 |

Table 2 (cont'd)

| | Percent |
|---|---|
| 14. Students Given Choice of Items to Answer? (N = 1455) | |
| Yes | 25.0 |
| No | 75.0 |
| 15. Course Material Covered Adequately by Test? (N = 1467) | |
| Yes | 88.1 |
| No | 12.0 |
| 16. Test Instructions Adequate? (N = 1460) | |
| Yes | 91.3 |
| No | 8.7 |
| 17. Testing Environment Satisfactory? (N = 1450) | |
| Yes | 86.1 |
| No | 14.0 |
| 18. Instructor Present During Test? (N = 1450) | |
| Yes | 87.7 |
| No | 12.3 |
| 19. Students Have Enough Time to Do Well on Test? (N = 1458) | |
| Yes | 76.9 |
| No | 23.1 |
| 20. Amount of Cheating Observed During Test (N = 1423) | |
| Very much | 3.0 |
| Much | 4.8 |
| Little | 13.6 |
| Very little | 17.8 |
| None | 60.7 |
| 21. Tests Corrected and Returned Promptly? (N = 1447) | |
| Yes | 74.8 |
| No | 25.1 |

Table 2 (cont'd)

| | |
|---|---|
| 22. Tests Graded Fairly? (N = 1449) | |
| Yes | 83.5 |
| No | 16.5 |
| 23. Spelling and Grammar Corrected on Essay Before Tests Returned? (N = 977) | |
| Yes | 42.2 |
| No | 57.8 |
| 24. Essay Questions Graded for Spelling and Grammar as Well as Content? (N = 964) | |
| Yes | 39.4 |
| No | 60.6 |
| 25. Did Instructor Review Returned Tests? (N = 1422) | |
| Yes | 52.4 |
| No | 47.6 |
| 26. Students Permitted to Keep Answer Sheets or Papers? (N = 1432) | |
| Yes | 65.4 |
| No | 34.6 |
| 27. Students Permitted to Keep Copies of Test Questions? (N = 1436) | |
| Yes | 56.0 |
| No | 44.0 |